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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000700

SIPDIS

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PACAF FOR GEN. HESTER
PACOM FOR FPA HUSO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/31/2016

TAGS: [OVIP](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF PACAF COMMANDER GENERAL
HESTER

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

11. (C) General Hester, all of us in Bangkok look forward to your return visit and your participation in Cope Tiger. Many of the issues that you addressed during your December visit remain of key importance -- especially the ongoing competition among Sukhoi, Saab and Lockheed Martin to supply replacements for RTAF's aging F-5's. While it appears likely that the RTAF will buy over 600 million dollars worth of Mid Life Upgrades (MLU) on many of its existing F-16s, PM Thaksin has been hinting that he will also make a token purchase of SU-30s to improve relations with Russia. We ask for your support in explaining to the Thai some of the possible ramifications of procuring Russian aircraft. The Thai will likely seek to exchange views with you about the future of Cope Tiger, upgrades at Utapao Naval Air Station and the future of the Indian and Chinese air forces. End Summary

PM THAKSIN

12. (SBU) PM Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) political party dominates domestic politics and controls 375 of the 500 seats in Parliament. Nonetheless, Thaksin has come under stronger criticism recently for his authoritarian tendencies, and allegedly for furthering his family's business interests through government policies. He maintains a firm control over his bureaucracy and the military.

F-16 SALE

13. (C) Last year, Thailand announced its plans to replace aging F-5s in the RTAF fleet. Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Rice and the President all urged Thailand to either use its defense budget to upgrade its existing F-16s or to buy F-16 Block 52s. A vast majority of senior RTAF officers favor the F-16 over SU-30. On January 24, ACM Chalit indicated to the Ambassador that the RTAF supported buying MLUs for many of its planes and Lockheed Martin has provided pricing data indicating a Thai purchase of over 600 million dollars worth of MLUs. However, on January 25 PM Thaksin suggested to the Ambassador that, in addition to the MLUs, he favored procuring a few SU-30s in order to improve Thailand's ability to sell goods in Russia. We are urging the Thai to proceed with the MLU purchase but not to procure any Russian planes for interoperability reasons, the impact such a move could have on technology releases in the future, and the affect such a procurement might have on Thailand's ability to eventually purchase the Joint Strike Fighter. It would be helpful for you to reinforce these points.

COPE TIGER

14. (C) The RTAF is pleased that we did not fold Cope Tiger 06 into Cobra Gold. Nonetheless, officials there are aware that we might revisit this issue again next year. It would be useful in your conversations with senior RTAF officers to get a sense of how serious they are about plans to proceed to hold the exercise bilaterally with Singapore, or even invite a third country, if we insist on moving it. RTAF officials will also be very interested in hearing any update about our plans.

UTAPAO UPGRADES

15. (C) Thai military officials still await the results of a PACAF assessment of Utapao Naval Air Station which took place in September. They would appreciate any update you can provide on the status of that assessment. Thai and U.S. officials in country agree that Utapao needs some safety upgrades in order to continue to be of use to both countries. Royal Thai Navy officials recently indicated to the Ambassador that they seek radar upgrades at Utapao in addition to fire safety and other improvements.

THE ROLE OF CHINA AND INDIA IN THE REGION

16. (C) Southeast Asia continues to feel the rising influence of China and India. While emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region -- and Thailand's desire to intensify U.S. engagement -- Thai leaders also focus on developing stronger

relations with the two regional powers. Bangkok views both countries as sources of unlimited consumer demand and hope to conclude Free Trade Agreements with both nations. Given your close interest in those countries, it would be worthwhile for you to exchange views on the future roles of India and China.

COUNTERTERRORISM AND SOUTHERN THAILAND

17. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin's biggest domestic challenge is the unsettled security situation in the far southern part of the country. Southern Thailand, in particular the southernmost Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has experienced episodic violence since it was incorporated into the Siamese Kingdom in 1902. However, since January 2004, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the level of violence. Press reports indicate that over 1,000 persons have been killed either by militants or by security forces during this period. Local Muslim separatist militants have attacked symbols of Thai and Buddhist authority, civilians, and local citizens suspected of collaborating with the Government. There continue to be daily incidents of violence. In March 2005, Thaksin appointed a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) headed by highly respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun to look for alternative solutions to the long-running insurgency. The NRC is expected to present its findings in early 2006.

18. (C) Thai officials may ask you for U.S. equipment and technology such as UAVs. They would be interested in anything you might have to say about Global Hawk. You may also wish to point to our current efforts to improve human rights training for Thai soldiers and officers who will rotate to the South. There are widely circulated rumors among the ethnic Malay Muslims that the U.S. has fomented the violence in the South in order to justify a U.S. security presence there. This has made the RTG very sensitive about any visible U.S. assistance aimed at the South. You should be aware of these concerns when discussing offers of possible U.S. assistance.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR VISIT

19. (U) Although it appears we may not be able to hook up during your upcoming visit, I hope it will be a safe and most productive one for you.

BOYCE